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AUTHOR Betres, James
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ABSTRACT

Data on elementary social studies education in Rhode Island public schools in 1979 are analyzed. Of the 62 schools randomly selected for the study, 265 elementary teachers completed a 63-item social studies questionnaire. The questionnaire asked teachers to identify the curriculum design method they employed; indicate the types of curriculum sources, methods, and materials which they used; evaluate social studies objectives; and express their views on the effectiveness of their social studies programs. Two-thirds of the teachers use an expanding environment curriculum design; most teachers rely on their own ideas and the textbooks as sources for directing their classroom programs; primary and intermediate grade teachers support both student citizenship and other social studies objectives; and teachers consider their program to be somewhat successful and of average quality compared to others. Among the conclusions are that (1) while course content and instruction may be excellent in individual classrooms, there is not a well-defined, integrated six-year program; (2) the reliance on basal texts for program direction is viewed with some reservations; (3) the support of citizenship and social studies objectives is in line with the goals of public education; and (4) because social studies teachers do not design their programs, they neither identify with nor are very enthusiastic about them. (NE)

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THE STATUS OF ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION IN SELECTED RHODE ISLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

During the Spring of 1979, a Study of Social Studies Education in Rhode Island Public Schools was conducted through a research grant from Rhode Island College. Of the 40 elementary school districts in the State, 32 districts agreed to participate in the study. These districts contained 215 of the 290 public elementary schools and a random sample of 62 schools were selected for the study. A 63 item Social Studies Questionnaire was completed by 265 of the elementary teachers in the schools. Results and analyses of these data are contained in this study.

Date of preparation: November. 1981

Author's Name: James Betres
Associate Professor
Dept. of Elementary Education
Rhode Island College
Providence, Rhode Island
Phone: 401-456-8016

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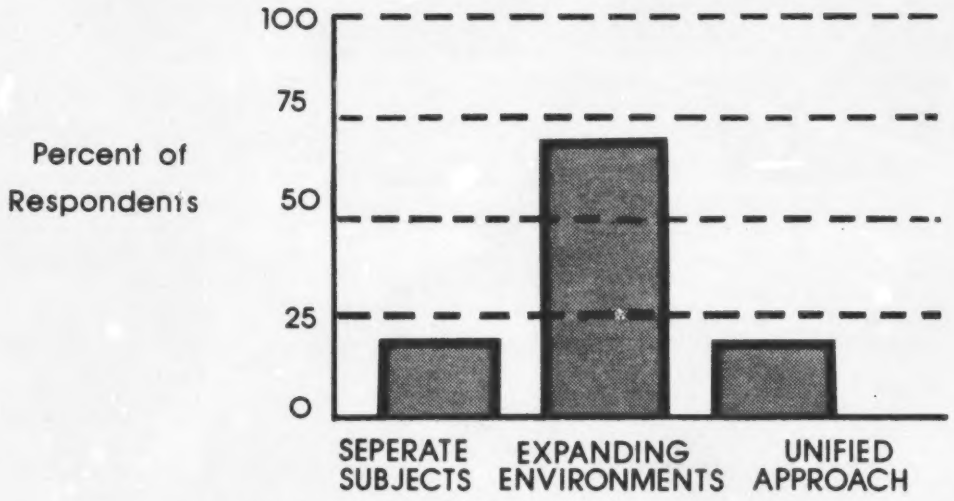
The Status of Elementary Social Studies Education
in Selected Rhode Island Public Schools

I. Types of Curriculum Design Employed

TABLE I

CURRICULUM DESIGNS USED



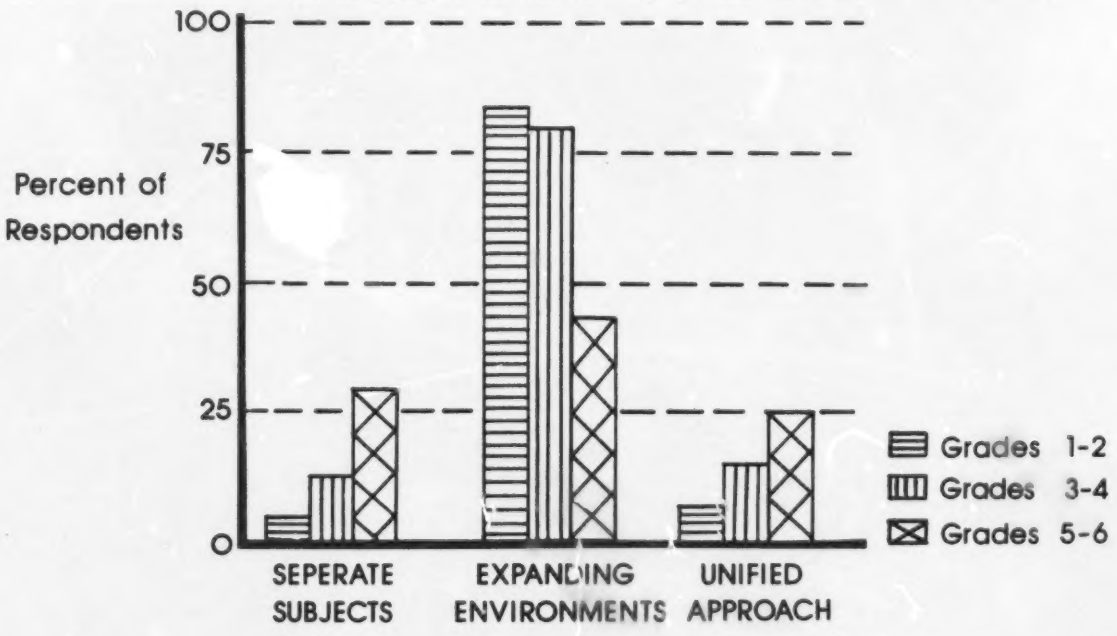
As indicated in Table I, approximately two-thirds of the respondents indicated their use of an Expanding Environments Curriculum design. This approach has the primary grades emphasize the study of the family, neighborhood, and community while the intermediate grades emphasize a study of state, region, nation, and other countries/cultures. Most of the remaining teachers indicated using either a Separate Subjects Approach emphasizing history, geography and civics, or a Unified Approach where main ideas from several disciplines are used in studying major topics. However, further analysis of the data indicated what may be an important point.

When teacher responses were classified by grade level taught (Table II,) it was found that a major program shift occurs in the late intermediate grades. Specifically, while

83% of the grade 1-2 teachers surveyed indicated the use of an Expanding Environments Approach, only 43% of the grade 5-6 teachers indicated the same type of program. This substantial shift away from Expanding Environments Approach was almost equally divided between the Separate Subjects Approach and the Unified Approach.

TABLE II

CURRICULUM DESIGNS by grade levels



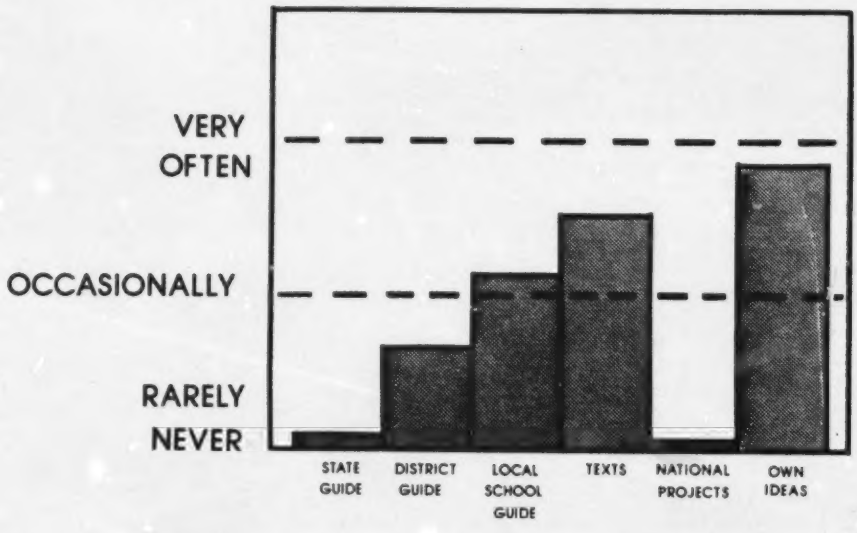
II. Types of Curriculum Sources, Methods, and Materials Used in the State's Elementary Schools.

Teachers were asked to indicate the frequency of use of six curriculum sources for directing their programs. These sources were

1. state guides
2. school district guides
3. local school guides
4. textbooks
5. national curriculum projects
6. teachers' ideas

TABLE III

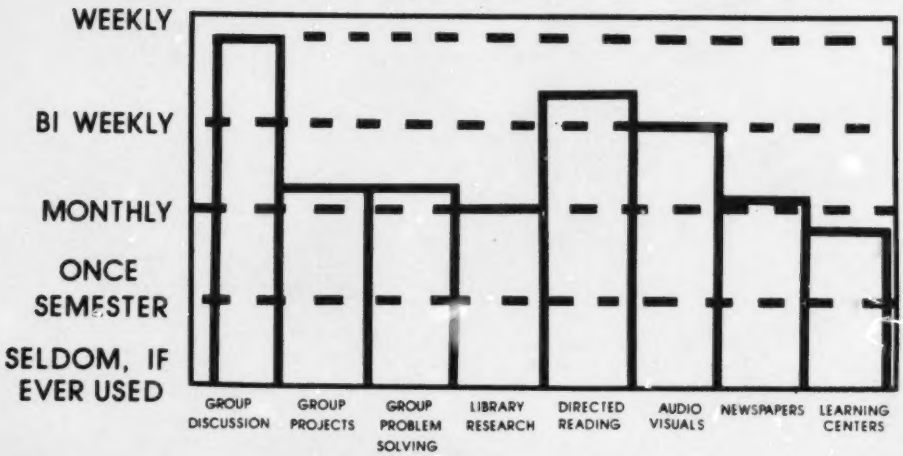
CURRICULUM SOURCES-FREQUENCY USED



The data in Table III indicated teachers rely most heavily on their own ideas and class texts as sources for directing their programs. District and local curriculum guides were given occasional attention while the national social studies curriculum projects and a non-existent State guide were rarely/never used.

Table IV data indicated teachers used discussion techniques, directed reading techniques, and audio-visual presentations most frequently. The remaining techniques and materials noted in Table IV were used about one a month. Role playing, games and simulations, and field trips were used once a semester or less and are not included in Table IV.

TABLE IV
METHODS & MATERIALS - FREQUENCY USED



Further analysis of the data in Tables II, III, and IV by grade level yielding several substantial differences. In grades one and two approximately two-thirds of the teachers responded that they did not use a specific text. By grades three and four this situation had reversed and about 80% of the teachers indicated the use of a specific text.

In terms of teaching techniques additional changes appeared to take place as the children progressed from the primary to the intermediate grades. In grades one and two the "typical" academic month found the children receiving social studies instruction twice a week. Approximately half of the time was used for large and small group discussions, and one fourth of the time employed audio-visual materials such as films, film strips, records, and television. The remainder of the time found a wide variety of methods and materials being used ranging from learning activity centers to directed reading activities.

In grades three and four the amount of time allocated to social studies instruction increased to three or four periods per week. Here again large and small group discussion was the dominant technique however, directed reading was the second most frequently used type of learning activity. Approximately two-thirds of the teachers reported using it at least weekly while the use of audio-visual materials was a biweekly activity for most

students. The remainder of the month had the children engaged in a limited but significantly different selection of activities than that found in the earlier grades. Specifically the students were engaged in projects, reports, library research, or small group problem solving on a once a month basis.

By grades five and six the students met almost daily for social studies instruction. Again large and small group discussion dominated with 90% of the teachers reporting its use at least weekly. Directed reading activities and audio-visual materials were used with the same approximate frequency as that found in grades three and four. The remainder of the academic month found the students engaged in library research, projects and small group problem solving.

To conclude this section of the study the questionnaire contained a list of nineteen areas of study that teachers were asked to evaluate in terms of the relative importance of those areas to their social studies programs. The list contained a number of traditional and non-traditional topics and disciplines that were to be rated as extremely important, important, not emphasized, or not treated.

Table V contains the results for eleven topics associated with social studies education. Table VI contains the results for eight disciplines associated with social studies education.

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TABLE V

Percent of TEACHERS, by grade level Considering Topic Important or Extremely Important

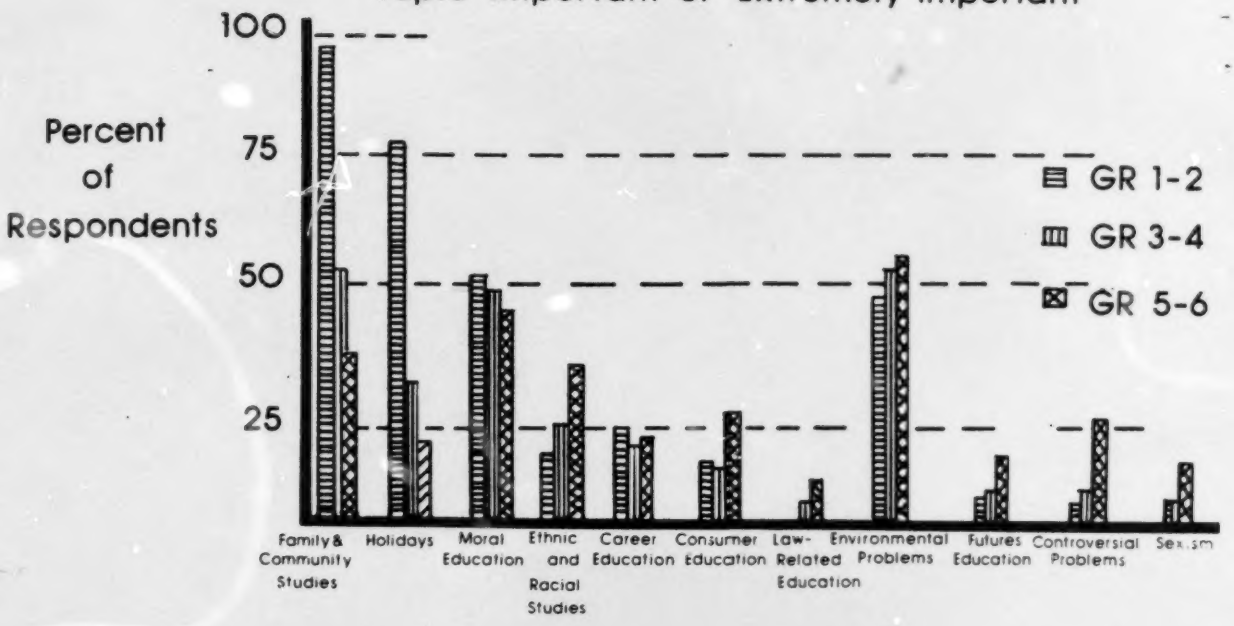
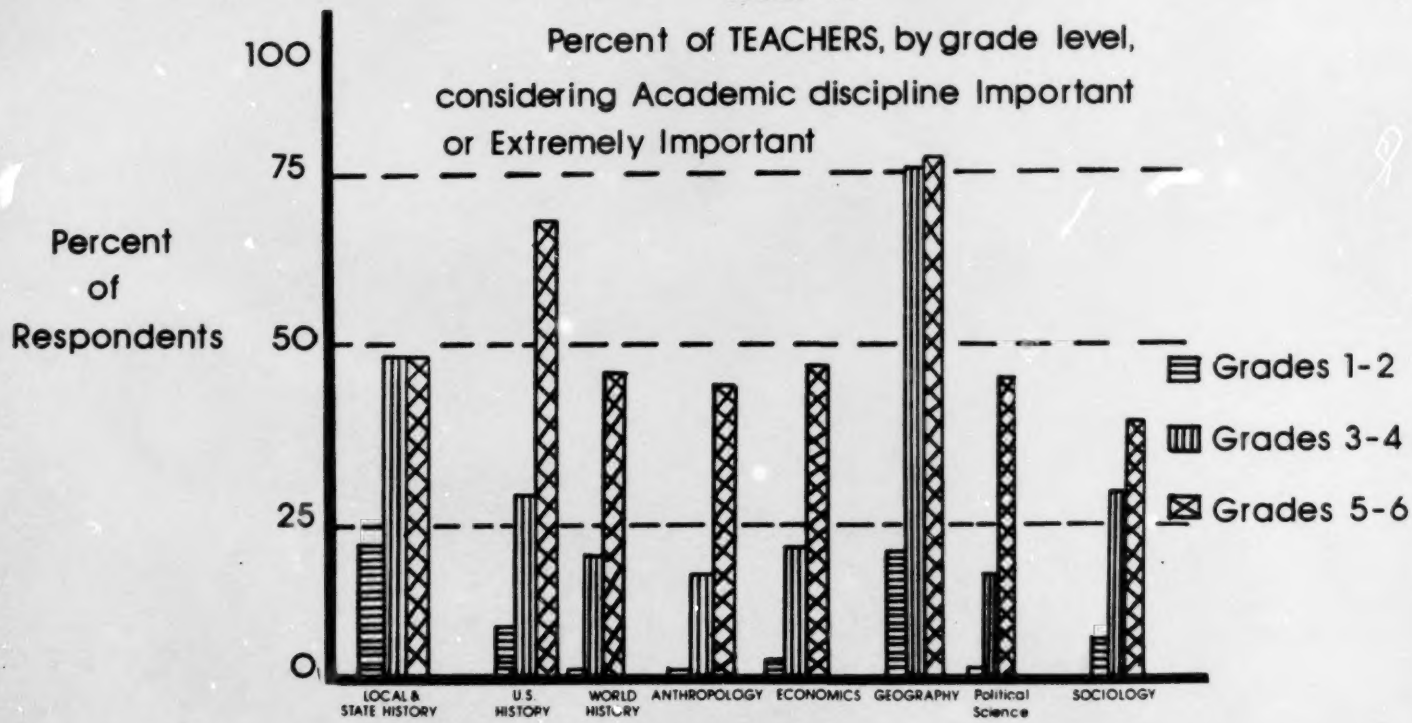


TABLE VI

Percent of TEACHERS, by grade level, considering Academic discipline Important or Extremely Important



Analysis of the data in Tables II, V, and VI indicated a relatively consistent relationship between grade levels, types of programs, and the topics and disciplines considered important by the teachers. Specifically teachers of the first and second grades ascribed little importance to any of the academic disciplines listed. The primary grade program gave greatest emphasis to family and community studies and the topic of holidays. Moral education and environmental problems were considered quite important by approximately half of the grade one and two teachers.

For grades three and four a significant shift in program emphasis took place. The academic discipline of geography was considered quite important by over three fourths of the teachers. Local/state history, family and community studies, and moral education were considered important by approximately half of the teachers.

At the fifth and sixth grade levels, teachers indicated considerable attention given to the disciplines of geography and United States history. In addition, approximately half of these teachers considered the following areas of study important:

Local and State History
World History
Anthropology
Economics
Political Science
Sociology
Moral Education
Environmental Problems

Therefore, teachers of primary grade children strongly emphasized those areas of study traditionally associated with an expanding environments design. Teachers of intermediate grade children tended to place somewhat less emphasis on the expanding environment topics and correspondingly increased the emphasis on topics associated with history and the social sciences.

One interesting point merits attention. Of the various "New Social Studies" topics of the past decade only moral education and environmental problems appear to have become significant additions to present practices. While the former may represent a broader societal movement as noted in the 9th Annual Gallup Poll, the latter topic has no research explanation at this time.

III. Teachers' Evaluation of Objectives for Social Studies and Citizenship Education

Teachers were asked to rate the importance for their students of six general social studies objectives and seven general citizenship objectives. All of the objectives were developed for the National Assessment of Education Progress and were the basis for the NAEP development of test and research in the citizenship/social studies learning area.

Listed below are the six general social studies objectives. Teachers were asked to rate these objectives as being extremely important, important, somewhat unimportant, unimportant, or not relevant for their students.

Table VII presents the percentages of teachers by grade level who considered each objective either extremely important or important.

Six General Social Studies Objectives (NAEP)

1. Develops a knowledge base for understanding the relationships between human being and their social physical environment.

2. Develops an understanding of the origins and interrelationships of beliefs, values, and behavior patterns.

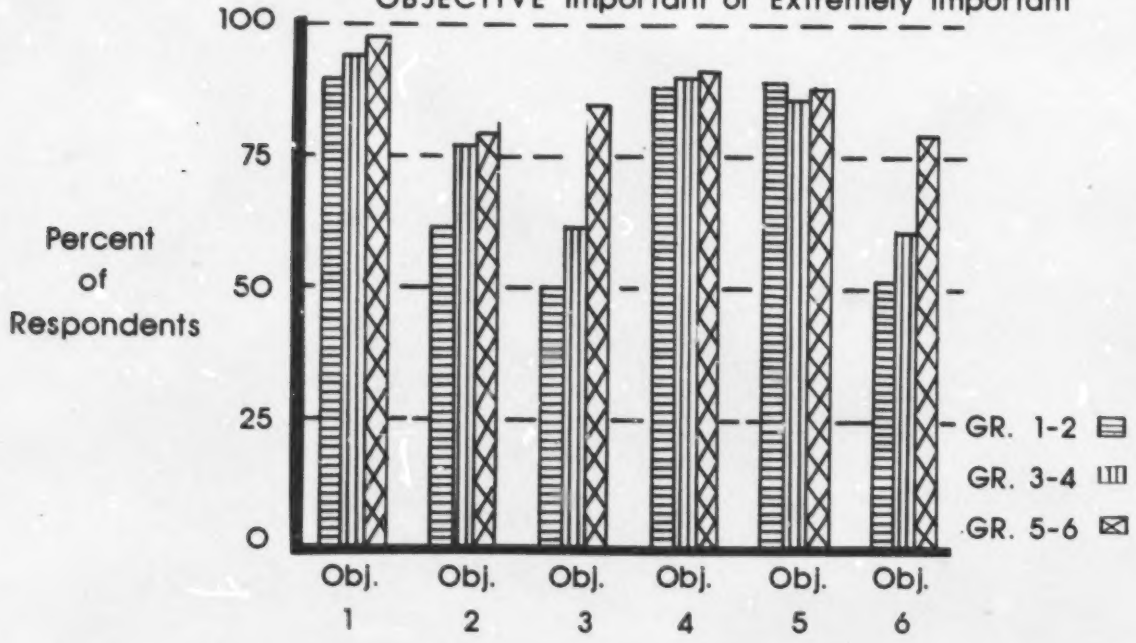
3. Develops the competencies to acquire, organize and evaluate information for purposes of solving problems and clarifying issues.

4. Develops the human relation skills necessary to communicate and work with others.

5. Develops a positive self-concept, builds self esteem and moves toward self-actualization.

6. Develops and demonstrates a commitment to the right of self-determination for all human beings and a willingness to take rational action in support of means for securing and preserving human rights.

TABLE VII Percent of TEACHERS by Grade levels, considering OBJECTIVE important or Extremely Important



Regardless of grade level, the general social studies objectives dealing with students' self concept development, acquisition of human relation skills, and understanding the relationship between human beings and their social and physical environment were strongly supported by the teachers.

Interestingly objective 3 dealing with the acquisition of problem solving and critical thinking skills received marginal support from first and second grade teachers, and approximately one third of the third and fourth grade teachers did not consider this objective important. However, fifth and sixth grade teachers gave very strong support for this objective.

Similar grade level results were obtained for the objective 6 dealing with developing student commitment to the right of self determination for all human beings.

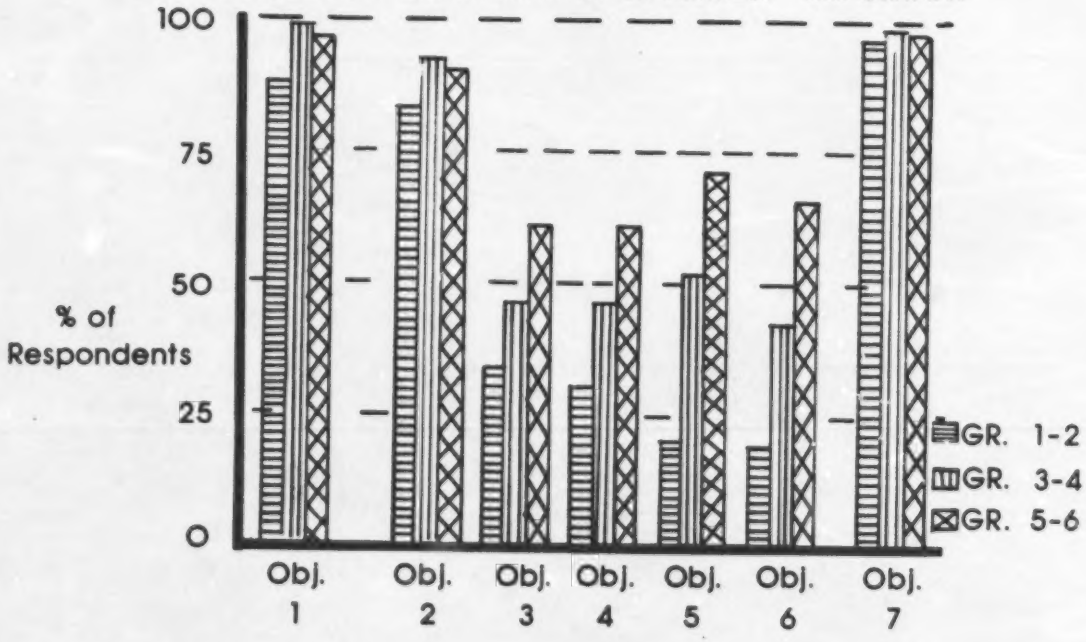
Teachers were then requested to rate the following seven citizenship objectives developed by the NAEP. The results are found in Table VIII.

Seven Citizenship Objectives (NAEP)

1. Show concern for the well-being and dignity of others.
2. Support just law and the rights of all individuals.
3. Know the main structure and functions of their governments.
4. Participate in democratic civic improvement.
5. Understand important world, national, and local civic programs.
6. Approach civic decisions rationally.
7. Help and respect their own families.

TABLE VIII

Percent of TEACHERS by Grade level, Considering OBJECTIVE IMPORTANT or EXTREMELY IMPORTANT



Citizenship objectives dealing with support of just laws, positive family relationships, and concern for the right and well being, and dignity of others received strong support by all teachers regardless of grade level. However, as in the case of the social studies objectives teachers of grades 1 through 4 gave minimal support to objectives dealing with knowledge of government structure and functions, participation in democratic civic improvement, understanding world, national, and local civic problems, and approach civic decisions rationally.

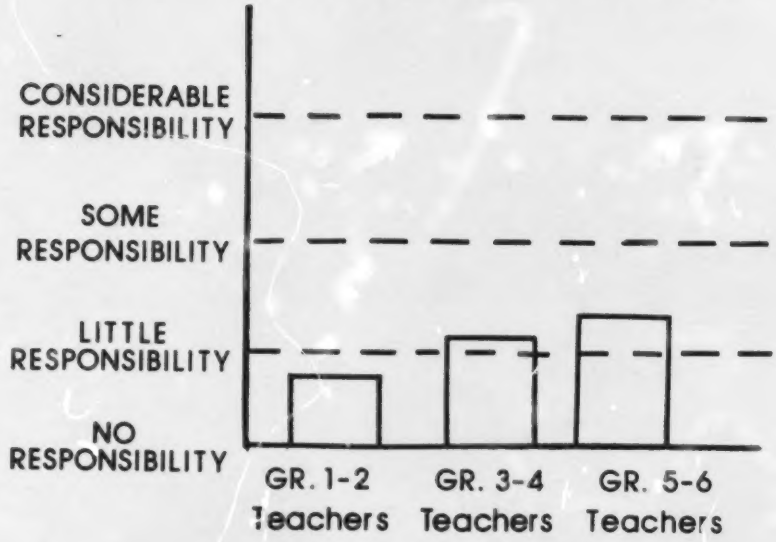
Taken together, the results in Tables VII and VIII contain a number of possible implications that will be discussed in the final section of this study.

IV. Teachers Views on the Development and Effectiveness of Their Social Studies Program

The past decade has witnessed a wide variety of approaches used in the development and implementation of social studies curriculum. Rather than attempt to identify the specific means employed in designing local social studies programs, this study requested teachers to indicate the amount of personal responsibility they had in designing their own programs. It was felt that since a sense of personal identification with a program frequently affects the classroom implementation of it, these results might give some indication of the teachers' disposition or general attitude toward the existing program. Specifically teachers were asked to indicate whether they had considerable, some, little, or no responsibility in the design of their program.

TABLE IX

TEACHERS, by Grade level, Amount of Responsibility in Designing Their Present Programs



While some differences are indicated in Table IX, teachers appeared to feel that they had little to do in the actual development of their programs. The potential problems related to such perceptions are many and will be discussed later in this study.

Using whatever criteria they considered appropriate, teachers were then asked to indicate the success of their program (Table X) and then to compare their program to those of other schools in Rhode Island (Table XI.) Table X indicated that teachers generally considered their programs to be somewhat successful and Table XI indicated that relative to other schools, teachers considered their programs to be about average.

TABLE X

Teachers by grade level, success of their Social Studies program

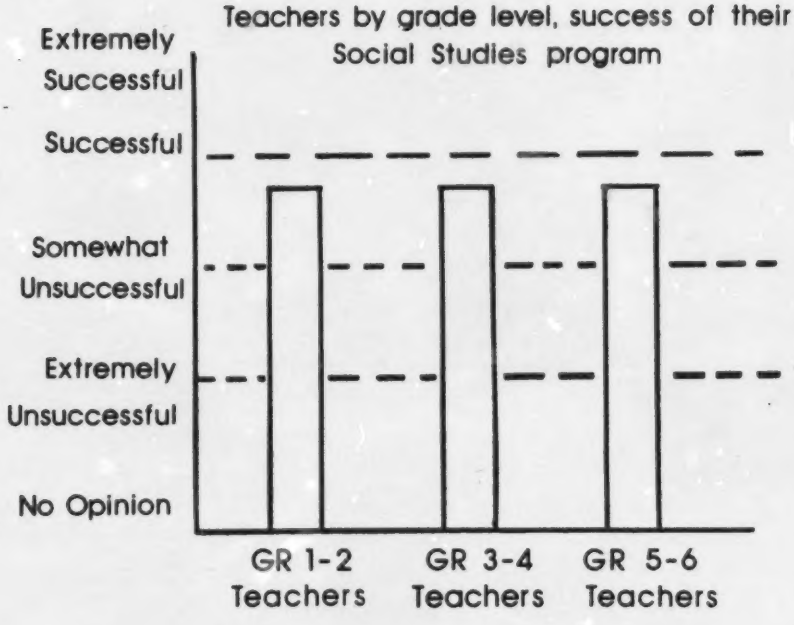
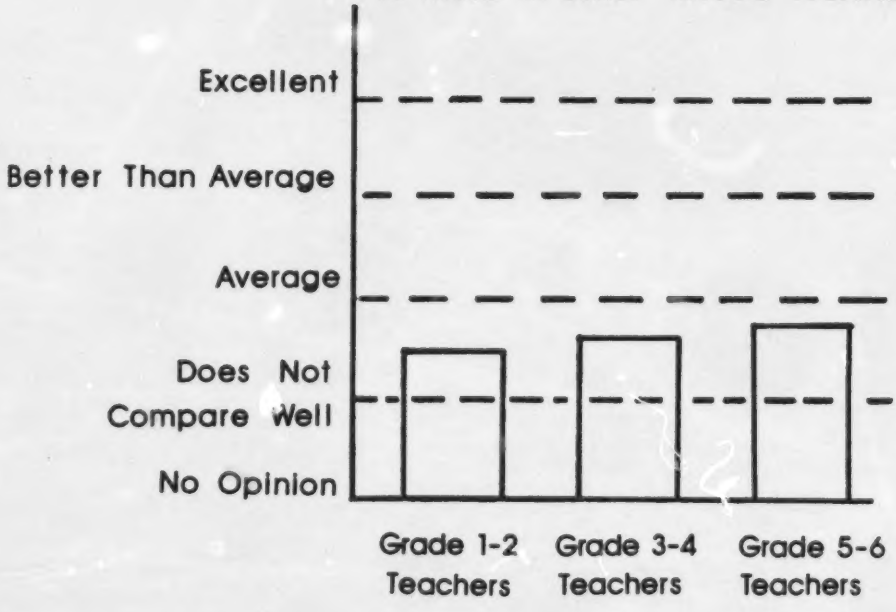


TABLE XI

Teachers, by grade level, comparison of their program To those in other RHODE ISLAND SCHOOLS



Conclusions:

Area I: Types of Curriculum Designs Employed

Based on the results of this segment, it appears that a well defined and implemented scope and sequence does not exist in the elementary schools surveyed. While excellent course content and instruction may be present in many individual classrooms, it does not appear that these are a part of an integrated program that leads the child through a well planned six year sequence. Instead, the study indicated a "split" program with primary grade teachers emphasizing topics related to the family, community, and holidays while the intermediate grades attended to the more traditional disciplines of History and Geography. Such an approach is common throughout the country and is reflected in the content found in many commercially produced elementary Social Studies texts. However, this combination of an expanding environments design with separate subjects approach has no educationally valid grounds. Both approaches are based on different sets of assumptions and objectives that may be incompatible. While on paper some relationships can be drawn between the two types of designs, little, if any, evidence exists that suggests this combination of designs can help students achieve the objectives found in the curriculum guides of most public schools or professional organization guidelines. A similar set of findings by Gross indicates the problem is widespread.

> "A majority of our respondents indicate that a well integrated scope and sequence just does not exist in their systems. In spite of a number of curriculum revisions reported underway at local levels, individual school and teacher autonomy, as well as the lack of specific allocations of topics or subject matter in recent state social studies frameworks or guides, all contribute to the increasing discontinuity of the patchwork social studies programs of our times."[1]

Until programs become more consistently applied, the successes of individual classroom teachers will not be reinofrced and extended by succeeding teachers. While an academic year may seem to be a lengthy period of instructional time to non-educators, the complexity of major social studies objectives requires years to achieve. Such objectives require a truly integrated program that is fully understood, implemented, and supported by the professional staff. Based on the results of this study such an integrated program does not appear to be a characteristic of most Rhode Island elementary Social Studies programs.

Area II: Types of Curriculum Courses, Methods, Materials, and Areas of Study Employed in the State's Public Elementary Schools.

In terms of sources for program direction, the greatest emphasis is placed on the teacher's own ideas and the textbook used in the classroom. While curriculum guides receive some limited attention, the national projects of the sixties appear to have made no lasting impression on the local social studies programs. These results tend to sup-

[1]Gross, Richard E., "The Status of the Social Studies in the Schools of the U.S." Facts and Impressions of the National Survey," Social Education, 41:3 (March, 1977)

port Gross' earlier comments regarding autonomy and the resulting patchwork program. Furthermore, the significant reliance on basal texts for program direction must be viewed with some reservations in light of research findings dealing with the design of many social studies texts. Generally speaking the research indicates that many social studies texts series are inappropriate for many children in terms of the child's developmental capabilities. Additional studies have seriously questioned the readability of some of these materials.[2]

Generally speaking, the research indicates that many social studies texts are simply inappropriately constructed for many of the children who will be required to use them. In most cases the inappropriateness of the texts stems from the fact that they are not constructed in line with the developmental levels of the child (too abstract, premature emphasis on certain sensory modalities, etc..) Equally lacking in many of these texts is any use of our basic understanding of how children learn concepts. In light of the social studies reliance on conceptual understandings one should be able to assume that most social studies texts would be designed in line with the relatively excellent research base we have concerning concept learning. Research indicates that this is not the case.

[2]Lunstrom, John. "Reading in The Social Studies." Social Education, 40:1, (January, 1976) pp. 10-18.

Finally, while some social studies texts series have shown considerable improvement in the areas of bias (racial, ethnic, sexual,) the problem still exists in some of these materials.[3]

In terms of teaching methods the use of discussion techniques, directed reading activities, and audio-visual presentations appears to be the dominant methods employed across grade levels. This combination of techniques tends to represent a fairly directive learning environment with some limited allowance for skill development and problem solving; the latter being two major concerns of what has been called the "New Social Studies." Unfortunately, data analysis by grade level indicates that problem solving and library research activities do not appear to be of even limited importance to teachers until the fifth and sixth grade. Whether this is because of the lack of resources, teachers expectations, or some other factors was not assessed in this study.

However, while the use of directed reading activities may adequately attend to some reading skill development concerns, the limited use of problem solving activities and library research may indicate inadequate attention being given to the development of other important cognitive and research skills.

[3]Hunkins, et al. Review of Research in Social Studies Education: 1970-75. Bulletin 49, 1977, Chapter 2.

In terms of what content is taught, the "split" program alluded to earlier is borne out by the data in this segment of the study. Teachers of primary grade children tend to use the content of an Expanding Environments design, while teachers of the fifth and sixth grade tend to use a Separate Subjects or a Unified approach. Of the academic disciplines identified, primary grade teachers consistently indicated that none of the disciplines were important components of their programs. Teachers of grades three and four tended to give the disciplines a somewhat higher though still not significant rating. In the fifth and sixth grades teachers strongly emphasized U.S. History and Geography, and some emphasis was given to all of the other social sciences. While many implications can be drawn from these data, the overriding conclusion appears to be that the previously identified "split" program is more than a shared perception of teachers. It is a content reality.

In terms of the importance of various topics, there is a substantial concern with the areas of moral education and environmental problems. These areas are considered by many to be critically important to a social studies program aimed at assisting students to become effective members of a democratic society. However, the extremely low teacher ratings given to the topic of controversial problems leads one to question how the topics of moral education and environmental problems are being approached since both topics have many controversial aspects.

Another question raised by the results in this segment centers around the extremely low rating given to law related education. This topic was given the least support of any of the topics yet participants gave strong support to the citizenship objective of support for just laws and the rights of all individuals.

Area III: Teachers' Evaluation of Social Studies and Citizenship Objectives

In general primary and intermediate grade teachers gave overwhelming support for the student citizenship objectives related to aiding and respecting families, showing concern for others, and support of just laws and individual rights. In addition, the social studies objectives dealing with developing human relation skills, a knowledge base in the social sciences, and the enhancement of self concept were given similar support. This combination of objectives is certainly a vital part of the overall goals of American public education and indicates that the intent of the participants, in this case, is consistent with both the broad goals of public education and the positions taken by many professional organizations in the field.

Equally encouraging is the increasing importance attributed to the other objectives when the data are analyzed by grade level. While some people prefer to see certain objectives given greater emphasis, particularly in the early

grades, it appears that most of the objectives receive significant support by the fifth and sixth grade. The only possible exceptions to this are the citizenship objectives dealing with civic improvement, rational civic decision-making and understanding important world, national, and local problems. This cluster of objectives represents the social problem solving portion or action component of a citizenship education program. Approximately one-fourth to two-fifths of the fifth and sixth grade do not support these objectives and while these objectives are admittedly very difficult to treat they are considered critical to the development of effective citizens, a process which research indicates should not be delayed until later grades since the political attitudes of students are being formed well before the sixth grade.[4]

Area IV: Teacher's Views on the Development and Effectiveness of their Social Studies Programs

Overall, teachers consider their school's Social Studies program to be somewhat successful and of average quality when compared to the Social Studies program of other Rhode Island public schools. Furthermore, teachers indicate that, regardless of grade level, they had little responsibility in designing their present programs. Perhaps some relationship exists between these findings, since a

[4]Stentz and Lambert. "An Emperical Reformulation of Political Efficacy," Theory and Research in Social Education, V:1 (April, 1977) pp. 61-62.

lack of identification with the design of a program may lead to a less than enthusiastic implementation of it. Furthermore, it may indicate the reason for the somewhat limited use of curriculum guides.

Comments:

The data supplied in this study generally tends to support the perceptions held by many individuals in the field. Elementary programs in Social Studies are in many cases an inconsistent collection of designs, methodologies, and contents. Obviously there are exceptions both in individual classrooms and schools; however, in the case of the former the apparent lack of coordination between grades would likely fail to capitalize on these excellent individual efforts.

It is doubtful if any hue and cry will be raised by the general profession in the near future simply because the task of conceptualizing, designing, implementing, and evaluating the Social Studies at the programatic level is so difficult. In addition, the public attention appears to be presently focused primarily on matters such as educational costs, back-to-basics, and school discipline. Therefore, it is quite unlikely that the Social Studies would generate much public interest. One can reasonably conclude that unless those directly concerned with Social Studies education in the public schools become more active

and effective in bringing about positive change in the field, this area will simply become an excellent idea whose time never came.